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Aspasia Velissariou

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EDITOR’S NOTE

Traduit par Jean-Thomas Rieux

1 William Congreve’s novella, Incognita (1692), has received a number of formalist readings that usually focus on the ways in which it reproduces or distances itself from the author’s own critical concerns and artistic design as expressed in his preface. Such readings provide interesting insights into the complexities of the plot and the use of a self-conscious narrator whose central function is to constantly undercut claims to the truth of the story. By correctly emphasizing the lack of the author’s concern for realism, they draw attention to the aesthetic standards that he aspires to meet. Predictably, however, because they are circumscribed by the self-referential and meta-fictional terms that the authorial voice inscribes, formalist approaches end up full-circle: They reconfirm their methodological assumptions of the artificial and/or purely aesthetic character of the novella. Incognita may be a “pleasing artifice which has been so aware of its own construction”, but it is more than a mere exercise in formal excellence.

2 In his complex analysis, Michael McKeon eschews the formalist pitfall by arguing that Incognita combines an epistemological critique of romance truth with the interrogation of the aristocratic ideology of inherited status. Because I consider his argument important to my own reading, I shall refer to it at length, albeit selectively. McKeon draws attention to the extreme gullibility of Congreve’s heroes whose idealizing delusions derive from romance, and as such they are satirized by authorial intrusion. Pointing out the “implausible resolutions” to which the narrative gives rise, he remarks that it is
precisely the narrator’s vociferous claims to the truth of the story, sustained by authenticating narrative devises, that raise suspicions of his role as recorder of truth. Doubts as to his reliability are reinforced by the discovery that the protagonist’s struggle to marry the woman he loves (and not the bride destined by his father) was for naught since there was never a “real” problem in the first place. In other words, the conflict between Aurelian’s love for Incognita and his duty to his father to marry Juliana (for the sake of peace between two families in ancient animosity) had been resolved from the outset: Incognita was Juliana, but the truth of her identity had been disguised by the author. Consequently, the heroes’ progressive right to the free choice of partner has proved to be as unfounded as their problem. The resolution by which marriage for love ultimately coincides with dynastic continuity may have a salutary effect on alliance but for this very reason it does not jeopardize patriarchal order.

My reading of Incognita concentrates on the heroes’ peculiar characteristic, namely, their proneness to mistake which I see as a result of their permanent misreading of signs. While McKeon attributes their credulousness to the précieuse fantasies of love that the romance promotes (and Congreve parodies), I argue that their constant blunders derive from their overreliance on similitude as the organizing principle of signification. The novella emphatically inscribes reading in terms of similitude as a source of error insofar as similitude establishes perception on the basis of an unproblematic reflection between sign and “object.” I want to maintain that similitude is overall responsible for the fancies and illusions to which the protagonists fall prey, because it represents an essentially antiquated mode of perceiving the organization and operation of signs. In The Order of Things Michel Foucault argues for the important epistemological break in Western thought which he locates in the declining status of similitude as instrumental in, and productive of, knowledge. Similitude played a significant role in knowledge until the end of the sixteenth century insofar as during the Renaissance the sign was constituted by resemblance because it functioned as a sign only to the extent that it resembled the thing that it indicated. Therefore, it was perceived as ternary, namely, the articulation of the marks, the content that they indicated, and the similitude between the marks and the things they designated. However, as Foucault argues, by the beginning of the seventeenth century similitude becomes responsible for confusion because it emerges as the cause of error while, at the same time, it is increasingly marginalized by being associated with imagination.

My argument is that Incognita exposes a crisis in similitude, which, significantly, traverses those signs that par excellence register aristocratic ideology, thus indicating a pathological dysfunction at its patriarchal core as this is crystallized around alliance and idealized masculinity. In this sense, there is an analogy, but more importantly an interrelationship, between aristocratic ideology and similitude insofar as both inform a way of perceiving and organizing experience that is clearly shown to be antiquated and therefore inadequate. Nonetheless, the destabilization that signification undergoes, exemplified by the heroes’ constant misreading of signs, is finally recuperated in the same way that patriarchy survives almost intact. For all their ignorance of the true identities of their lovers, the heroes have, after all, correctly identified them. Once restored, their identities are found to be in correct correspondence to rank, the central stake in the politics of the novella. That chance willed it so shows the inherent weakness of the ideology that Incognita inscribes but significantly also its tenacity: chance has worked for its improvement.
Congreve sets the first meeting of the two lovers, Aurelian and Incognita, in a masked ball. In their witty exchange about the connection between appearance and reality Aurelian supports his position that there is an intrinsic correspondence between external marks (apparel) and essence (mind) as follows: “Yet I cannot help defending an opinion, in which now I am more confirmed, that probable conjectures may be made of the ingenious disposition of the mind, from the fancy and choice of apparel,” to which Incognita responds,

The humour I grant ye... or constitution of the person... but I should hardly pass my censure upon so slight an indication of wit for there is your brisk fool as well as your brisk man of sense... I confess, ‘tis possible a fool may reveal himself by his dress... but a decency of habit, which is all that men of best sense pretend to, may be acquired by custom and example without putting the person to a superfluous expense of wit for the contrivance.

Aurelian concedes Incognita’s point rather too eagerly insofar as, as he notes subsequently, there may be many “good fancies” and “faces” which may be “borrowed and adulterate,” his own costume having been “borrowed” precisely like his own identity (he pretends he is his friend Hippolito). However he does not really respond to the very premise of her argument, namely, the cultural contingency of signs that makes extremely unsafe assumptions of their unmediated connection with (and therefore intrinsic correspondence to) the “thing” they signify. The arbitrariness of the signifier is suggested in Incognita’s witty remark that “by your maxim I cannot discover one fool in the company, for they are all well dressed” (482). Likewise, the narrator refuses us the description of her dress presumably because he, too, thinks that apparel is not a sure sign of wit, thus playfully acquiescing in her own maxim.

It is worth noting, however, that Aurelian seeks to validate his argument on the basis of the key term “probable conjectures”. He grounds his case on conjecturing, that is, reasoning from external to internal and from evident to nonevident by means of “probable signs”, that is, those effects that lead us to probable inferences as to their causes. Conjecturing on the basis of probable signs represents the dominant type of reasoning well into the eighteenth century but, as Foucault notes, signs no longer signified necessarily in terms of their similitude to the “thing” they indicated. In Incognita conjecturing proves to be an unsafe kind of reasoning by being associated with romantic fancy and idealized notions of male honour in both friends. Aurelian falls in love with the “shape, wit and air” of the masked Incognita “together with a white hand he had seen (perhaps not accidentally)... And for her face, which he had not seen, he bestowed upon her the best his imagination could furnish him with” (483). When later Incognita gives him the choice either of telling him who she is or of seeing her face, the hero opts for the latter. In the narrator’s parodying language of romance “nature seemed here to have played the plagiary, and to have moulded into substance the most refined thoughts of inspired poets” (491). The female face serves as a stabilizer of love in the romantic discursive practices of the male protagonists because both of them assume that surface similarities are imprints of nature and, therefore, sure guides to the truth of the beloved.

On being found by Aurelian disguised as a youth, Incognita starts the story of her life as follows: “I am sensible they [strange circumstances] are such that I shall not blame your severest conjectures, but I hope to convince you when you shall hear what I have to say in justification of my virtue”, to which Aurelian answers: “Justification... what infidel dares doubt it!... May I trust my sight, or does my fancy now only more strongly work? For I do
still preserve your image in my heart...” (513). Incognita presumes that Aurelian may have justifiably drawn unflattering inferences about her nature (“virtue”) from a number of probable signs (her being found in male disguise alone with a strange man in the dark). But, because Aurelian reads signs as probable only to the extent that they resemble what they indicate, the revelation of her face (“her perfections”) ironically protects him from the implications of “probable conjunctures”. That he adheres to this reasoning proves to be yet another of his numerous illusions because, to him, there is no possible discontinuity between his lover’s face and her virtue; neither is there indeed between her words and truth, a liability that the narrator carefully points out in his wry warning to the reader “not to believe every word which she told him, nor that admirable sorrow she counterfeited to be accurately true” (515). In the context of romantic love, that draws its validity from sight and fancy, “proper” reasoning can only be parodic and “true” identities are redundant or even unwelcome. They destroy romantic delusion by socially contextualizing desire. In this sense, Aurelian’s choice for his lover’s face rather than the name is not only dramatically pivotal to the unfolding of the plot (at this point Incognita’s true name would have terminated the narrative) but, also, exemplary of the mythopoiea of desire that Congreve parodies.

Central to this mythopoiea is the mystification of woman as the unknowable (“the incognita”/Incognita), woman as mystery, registered in Incognita’s permanent concealment by masks, veils and disguises and finally woman as a riddle that man is invited to decipher and always fails. As Robert Markley has shown, this mystification of feminalness is typical of Congreve, coexisting here, too, with familiar generalizations as to what women “truly” are. For example, Leonora is reduced by the narrator to essential femininity -- “in the bottom a very woman” (500) -- when she instantly falls in love with Aurelian although she never saw his face but only read his letter (written in reality by Hippolito but signed as Aurelian). As the narrator says, “the spirit... of Eve” has entered Leonora who, although aware that Aurelian is destined for her friend, Juliana, decides “to dress herself to the best of her advantage and... to kill him downright” (500-01). To the reader who may wonder how it is possible for a woman to fall in love with a man she never saw, the narrator cynically asserts that “a woman may be taken with the character and description of a man... and though she cannot imagine his real features or manner of wit... she has a general notion of what is called a real gentleman” (501).

Women are as prone as men to romantic fancy that constructs staple desire which turns its object, or indeed any object, to an indiscriminate recipient of prefabricated emotion. Therefore, the identity of the beloved is not important to Leonora either, because what count are preconceived notions of masculinity, that is, fictions of gender and the extent to which the beloved complies with them. The narrator has already prepared us for Leonora’s indiscriminate liking of what is in fact a fictional object10. When later on she realizes that she mistook Hippolito for Aurelian, she easily shifts her love to the former because “his person was altogether as agreeable, his estate and quality not at all inferior, to Aurelian’s” (523). The main difference, however, lies in the signs that trigger desire. It is female beauty that constructs male desire by being registered either in the face as an idealistic image (a “heavenly form”) that is stamped, for example, on Hippolito’s “soul” (496), or in the feminine body as physical attraction – the touch of Leonora’s hand causes “a successive warmth and chilliness” in his heart (486). By contrast, the face is wholly discredited in Leonora’s desire for “Aurelian” because man’s “real features” do not count in a woman’s preference but only generalized notions of character which coincide with
the definition of “a fine gentleman.” Leonora’s passion for the fictitious Aurelian is triggered by signs of excellence that inscribe “gentleman,” rather than by idealized physicality. Thus, female desire appears as inherently determined by hierarchical signs of rank centered in “birth.” This is obvious from Leonora’s subsequent appreciation of Hippolito’s status that is found to be equal to Aurelian’s. Although her “violent passion” for the fictitious Aurelian is clearly shown to be the product of “her active fancy” (506-07), and, as such, it is relegated to the area of unreasonable liking, her choice is, after all, accurate. As the narrator asserts, Hippolito is as good as his friend: “So that, although Leonora was indeed mistaken, she could not be said to be much in the wrong” (501). She might have been mistaken in the identity of her lover but her reasoning has proved to be solid because her understanding of the general character of “gentleman” was based on signs that formulate decorums, rank being the crucial one. Probable signs are therefore reconfirmed by the conservative notion of decorum\footnote{11 This is a typical instance of Congreve’s position in the novella. While he throws into relief the heroes’ inherently flawed perception of identities, by the same gesture he rescues them from the implications of their constant misreadings. As with Leonora, so with Aurelian it turns out that wrong identities do not necessarily signify bad selections. In reality, both of them end up making a perfectly decorous choice of lovers. Decorum serves the restabilization of a universe of disordered signification by reconfirming rank as an outstanding sign of character. The game of concealed identities had already been circumscribed by decorum, as the central paradigm of the masked Incognita, who is Juliana, clearly illustrates. Because disguise was always harmonized with rank it never really threatened order as personal preference always coincided with the interests of alliance. Decorum marks the limits of Congreve’s interrogation of the antiquated ideology of inherited status that he clearly shows to be at an impasse. This essentially ideological recuperation, however, does not develop as smoothly with the fallacies of the male protagonists. Congreve focuses on their blunders because of their centrality as heirs to the male line of inheritance and privilege. He associates their fallacious reading of signs with aristocratic misconceptions of male honor, which he parodies. At the same time, however, he inscribes their propensity to error as a liability that could potentially jeopardize their own genealogical position. The latter retains its ideological validity because it arises as the only constant in the chaotic signification that the young heroes construct on the basis of similitude.} that also justifies Leonora’s lack of discrimination in the object of her desire insofar as both men do not “disagree with that character” (501).

Misidentification caused by dress describes the heroes’ perception of the sign as unproblematically leading to the knowledge of the object that it marks. As Incognita compulsively indicates, habits are not to be trusted as the “probable” sign of anything insofar as their permanent function is disguise, the sign par excellence of deceiving appearances. Habits are not only unreliable but also treacherous because they lead to wrong inferences about identities insofar as they are associated with fancy rather than discrimination. “Fancying he saw the glimmering of diamond buttons,” that Hippolito wears on his sleeves, Aurelian comes to the assistance of a man engaged in defending himself against two assailants. It turns out that both the hero and the assailants were mistaken as to the identity of the wounded, Claudio, “grounding their mistake upon the habit”(493): the habit belongs to Lorenzo, but was worn by Hippolito and subsequently by Claudio. The diamond buttons are misleading synecdoches not only of the “real” person,
but significantly, also, of his multiple duplications. In his description of the masked ladies, the narrator emphatically inscribes “dress” as synonymous with deceptive appearances (“art”) that conceal “nature.” However, the male protagonists “conclude from these apparent perfections that there was not a mask which did not at least hide the face of a cherubim” (480). But cherubims do not differ, and neither do the two friends (“both well dressed”) in the ladies’ favorable impressions.12. Dress levels individualities constructing a number of overlapping mirror images on which identities are reflected as a mirage. As such, and contrary to the heroes’ reading of it, it stands as a sign of the destabilized identities that the novella describes as substitutions.

This overlapping of identities is central to Congreve’s pact with his reader. Because he writes a novella that parodies romance, he has necessarily to establish those romance presuppositions that form the matrix of his own critique. The doubling of self (like impersonation and disguise) is an important part of these presuppositions but, by being identified with mistaken identities ad infinitum, it turns into an emblem of severe fallacy. Thus, while Incognita incorporates the familiar topos of disguise in the form of wrong dress, it empties it of the generic assumption of self-transformation and the implication that it represents the antithesis to truth. Wrong costumes are simply an occasion of erroneous identifications deriving from an embarrassing adherence to similitude as a reflection of the real. More importantly, however, Congreve employs the notion of similitude as reflection to describe aristocratic ideology in the crucial areas of the family, genealogical status and honorable maleness. By the same token, similitude underscores a crisis in the very signs that constitute that ideology exposing it as an antiquated and therefore inadequate system of identification. Foucault notes of reflection in aemulatio (one of the forms that similitude takes) that

by duplicating itself in a mirror the world abolishes the distance proper to it; in this way it overcomes the place allotted to each thing. But which of these reflections... are the original images? Which is the reality and which the projection? It is often not possible to say.16

This statement registers the vicissitudes in aristocratic signification that the novella displays and which originate in the crucial level of patrilineal succession. The latter is perceived as the biological duplication of father in son. As such it represents the abolition of the son’s own “allotted” place by the patriarchal logic that assimilates individuality, and the distancing that the latter presupposes, into genealogical continuity in which each male generation mirrors another ad infinitum.

Significantly Incognita opens with the positioning of Aurelian in terms of ancestry, status and wealth that construct class privilege. Genealogy not only serves as a hierarchical index but, also, introduces the principles that dictate aristocratic signification. This is evident from the outset when the narrator describes the way in which Don Fabio perceives his son, “whom he now began to look upon as the type of himself: an impression he had made in the gaiety and vigour of his youth, before the rust of age had debilitated and obscured the splendour of the original.” And he wonders whether the father’s emotionality, when looking at his son, “were for regret at the recollection of his former self, or for the joy he conceived in being... revived in the person of his son” (475-76). Don Fabio sees Aurelian as his faithful copy, but, more importantly, the son stands as his father’s “signature.” In the universe of patrilineal signification the son is perceived as the father’s own imprint, that is, in terms of the most rigorous form of similitude that constructs son (copy) as his father’s (original) qualities impressed upon
him through birth. Physical resemblance marks the son’s life as a natural extension of the father’s; thus it displays the reproduction and safeguarding of inherited status and wealth as a political urgency that the generation of male offspring serves. That Don Fabio is also “revived in the person of his son” in the crucial aspect of the regeneration of the line of property is implied by the narrator’s comment on the old man’s large income.

At the same time, the mirroring of father in son triggers off two others that also inscribe aristocratic bonds: the mirroring of Aurelian in Hippolito—who is seen by Aurelian “as his second self” because of “resemblance in feature and proportion” (476) and of Lorenzo in Hippolito (by means of the former’s apparel). This game of swapping identities in which the two friends mirror each other but also duplicate others reaches an impasse when Hippolito realizes that Aurelian’s idea to impersonate him by taking his own name was unlucky. Wishing to clarify misunderstandings, and on his friend’s advice to make use in turn of his own name, Hippolito writes a letter to Leonora and signs it as Aurelian. This letter complicates things further as the narrator ironically anticipates: “They at last argued themselves into a belief that fortune had befriend them with a better plot than their regular thinking could have contrived” (497). Hippolito’s admission to Leonora that “I appeared to be other than myself... I was not then myself, nor am I now my own” (498) begs the question of what his true self is, or, for that matter, whether there is such a self.

In the novella, name, far from functioning as a stabilizer of disordered signification, reinforces the overlapping of identities and their innumerable substitutions that describe the aristocratic delight in the game of appearances, dissimulation and disguise. That the restoration of name is a requirement for the restoration of hierarchical order will be a further concern. Suffice it to stress here that the complicity of name in these games that draw their magic from similitude marks the heroes’ lack of discrimination between resemblance and illusion. However, from the beginning of the seventeenth century, “the chimeras of similitude loom up on all sides, but they are recognized as chimeras” because discrimination arises as one of the main activities of the mind; the identities of things are established through the examination of differences. Aurelian and Hippolito are shown to be devoid of this discriminating function of the mind as the episode of the tilting makes embarrassingly clear.

This episode is central to Congreve’s critique of the aristocratic ideology of chivalric maleness and the attendant notions of honor that the two friends embody. The crux lies again in the shift in resemblance that, from a source of knowledge, is firmly located on the side of fancy. The inability of Aurelian and Hippolito to perceive this shift is exposed in the form of quixotic delusions of masculine feats that are properly ridiculed by the narrator. Moreover, this very inability is not limited to a personal liability but extends to a wider signifying crisis that makes aristocratic codes literally unreadable by its own members. The two friends participate in the tilting staged to honor the beauty of Donna Catherina in the public celebration of her marriage to Don Ferdinand, under the mistaken impression that it is a real combat. But although “the thing was only designed for show and form” (503) they typically read the signs that construct the show as ternary; in reality, they treat similitudes as both the marks and the contents they indicate, thus they collapse their articulation into a single form. The narrator describes the costumes and accessories of chivalric maleness in a mock-heroic language that underscores the two heroes’ inane display of championship of their mistresses’ beauty. They are unable to discriminate chimeras from reality because they see this show of masculine competition as a reflection of an essential maleness constructed by aristocratic concepts of honor,
bravery and aggression. This necessarily involves the mystification of woman whose signs cannot be read, as with Donna Catherina’s picture, which, painted on a shield, cannot be deciphered by the two friends. “Not knowing her picture” (504) they apologize for having unwittingly insulted her beauty, although they do not offer any explanation regarding their misreading of the gold inscription on the shield “Above the Insolence of Competition.” But it is precisely this misreading of the written sign, as effected by their privileging of the word “competition” to the exclusion of the overall meaning, that triggers the chivalric vindication of their mistresses’ beauty. In reality, their misunderstanding of the inscription is essentially ideological because it is predicated on competitive notions of manhood that the two friends sustain.

18 Their adherence to this masculine ideal also prescribes their response to the choice offered to them either to acknowledge publicly their mistake or enter a combat. They opt for the latter because “they could not decline the combat, being pressed to it beyond an honourable refusal” (503). It is not accidental that their honorable ethics take the form of blindness and as such they expose as antiquated the ideology in which they are embedded. That chivalry is only good for show and useful as a mere spectacle devoid of the values that had once made it meaningful indicates a shift in the official aristocratic ideology that Incognita inscribes in Don Ferdinand. The pragmatism and political flexibility of the latter is obvious in his use of compromise as a resolution of conflict. That this resolution excludes armed confrontation becomes graphically clear in the blunted lances that the two cavaliers were ordered to use (although they were “all in good earnest”) and in the forbidding of swords. This “mock fight” was true only in the two ladies’ “tender breasts” (504) and as such it inscribes a contradiction in the ideology that it enacts: The mock fight describes the collapse of ancient aristocratic ethos; that the latter is staged as a compromised show indicates a certain potential of ideological self-transcendence.

19 Congreve uses for his setting “a rather stock Italy” in order to expose the inherent pathology of the patriarchal system that in Italy appears at its preposterous extremes but it is not alien either to English aristocratic practices. After giving us a lengthy and complicated account of the animosities among the principal families in Florence instigated by and involving male kin in blood feuds, the narrator wryly comments: Fabritio, being much concerned for his kinsman, vowed revenge (according to the ancient and laudable custom of Italy) upon Lorenzo if he survived, or in case of his death... upon his next of kin, and so to descend lineally, like an English estate, to all the heirs males of his family (489).

20 By being compared with family feud, English primogeniture emerges as an equally tyrannical practice, but so does forced marriage. As Incognita says, resistance to her father’s interests in alliance would mean that she would “be baited by my father, brother and other relations” (514), while Aurelian proclaims the freedom of choice as his inalienable right in a declamatory speech: “O ye unequal powers... give us a will to choose, then curb us with a duty to restrain that choice? Cruel father... am I to be the sacrifice to expiate your offences past—past ere I was born?... But, O, my soul is free; you have no title to my immortal being” (507).

21 Murderous confrontations among members of different aristocratic families not only construct hierarchical order but are also constitutive of notions of male honor that necessarily include physical violence. But because this system of political ascendancy is shown to have reached an impasse that threatens its physical reproduction, “the happy
reconciliation of two noble families” (500) through alliance emerges as the only solution. The conservatism of Congreve’s plot lies “in the advocacy of an increasingly antiquated method of maintaining family unit – the personal authority of the father – against not only the ancient blood feud but also the modern solution, the device of the strict settlement...”21 “The personal authority of the father” is restored and, moreover, reinforced by the tautology between love and duty that provides a mythical resolution to a real crisis in aristocratic ideological hegemony. Congreve describes the problem but also parodies its resolution by altering the romance convention of “discovered parentage”. Although the author undercuts the generic associations of the convention, since the two lovers’ parentage was “discovered” only at the end but was known or guessed by the reader all along, he nonetheless retains its ideological function, namely, the restabilization of hereditary descent through the restoration of name.

In Incognita, the alteration of names, and their vicissitudes, coincides with the game of delayed identities. During that game, name serves as a mere coin in the exchange of deceptive signs. This is thrown into relief by the fact that signatures on paper, that normally function as formal declaration of identity, here simply reconfirm illusionary identity. The fact that from Incognita’s torn letter the only intact piece ironically bears her pseudonym (a non-name), inscribes a semiotic instability in the character’s “personality”. According to Ronald Barthes, “the proper name acts as a magnetic field for the semes” i.e. those units of the signifier that combine to make up a character22. Here, however, the recurrent identical semes that normally construct character giving it a relative stability are shared by different characters. Insofar as signifiers of character are identical and common to more than one hero they neutralize the discriminating function of proper name and erase it as a synonym of individuality. Thus, the restoration of a hero’s proper name, which to the novelistic regime is “an instrument of exchange... [that] allows the substitution of a nominal unit for a collection of characteristics”23 is void here. Because the “collection of characteristics” that make up character is uniform to Aurelian and Hippolito, and exactly the same in Incognita and Juliana, the revelation or addition of the proper name alters nothing. In this sense, the unveiling is paradigmatic of the novella’s indifference to name as a sign of individuality24.

However, name is crucial precisely because it does not mark individuality but social positioning. Therefore its recovery turns into urgency for the patrilineal order, which cannot afford the game of substituted identities ad infinitum. Hippolito in the guise of Leonora’s cousin, Lorenzo, runs the risk of becoming the object of Don Fabritio’s (Juliana’s brother’s) revenge thus being unwittingly implicated in a vendetta. His signing as Aurelian potentially threatens the system of alliances that govern Florence because Aurelian and Leonora are an odd coupling in the same way that his falling in love with his “cousin” may cause further complications in Leonora’s family. Family structures are vulnerable to arbitrary naming that registers language as a simple convention making sense only in terms of an erotic game. While distancing himself from language as a register of a continuity of the social with the moral or cosmic order, Congreve draws attention to the implications of linguistic arbitrariness25. This threatens to dissolve not only family structures, which need to be improved rather than destroyed, but also the system of privilege and dependencies constructed by them; moreover, this system designates “individuality” as a corollary of position within it. Therefore, the recovery of
name is tantamount to the recovery of title in the political hierarchy outside which Aurelian cannot simply be.

The reinstatement of social identity is effected through chance that serves as the engine of the narrative. Chance emerges in the form of the “many probable casualties” which, as Congreve states in his preface, “intervene in opposition to the main design, viz. of marrying two couples so oddly engaged in an intricate amour” (475). At the same time, chance, as timely intervention, is precisely that force that brings about the happy ending. The point is that, far from being a mere structural principle of “the unity of contrivance” (which the author aspires to), chance is an integral part of the system of misrecognitions that the novella sustains. It is by chance that Hippolito mistook Aurelian for an enemy and attacked him with his sword. He could have killed him had not “the extraordinary care of providence” directed his sword in such a way that it gave him a little bruise with the hilt. Hippolito, shattered by his realization that he had almost committed “the most execrable act of amicide,” blames himself for “his blindness in not knowing his dearest friend” (495).

This incident exemplifies the operations of chance in *Incognita* as a whole. It describes the heroes’ mistakes but at the same time it is that very same element that rescues them from their mistakes. This association of chance with human agency, however flawed, prevents the heroes from turning into merely physical recipients of an action that simply happens to them since it does not originate in them. Congreve’s characters are not simple pawns in the game of fate insofar as that game may at times supersede their agency but it is partly instigated by them. So, the relationship of characters and chance differs from that which, as Mikhail Bakhtin puts it, typifies Greek adventure-time which wherever “appears in the subsequent development of the European novel, initiative is handled over to chance.” In *Incognita*, while chance is the structural principle of the narrative it is deprived of “all initiative and power” for another crucial reason too: In contrast with the Greek romance that Bakhtin analyzes, space here is both specific and concrete; as such it curtails chance, “for any concretization—geographic, economic, sociopolitical, quotidian—would fetter the freedom and flexibility of adventures and limit the absolute power of chance.” It is precisely the concretization of space in all the above respects, however sketchy, that, in the last analysis, allows chance to serve the wider ideological concerns that *Incognita* inscribes. Chance rescues Aurelian from the unhappiness of an arranged marriage since, as it turns out, the veiled Incognita is Juliana “differing nothing... but in her name” (525). This “but” is doubly significant: On the one hand, it is a gesture that throws into relief that chance after all has proved itself decorous, therefore there was never opposition between duty and love in the first place. On the other, however, it refers to Juliana’s name, which, though ironically underplayed, does indeed make the difference. Chance has effectively worked towards the stabilization and reassertion of aristocratic alliance and the continuation of inherited privilege, as the closing paragraph indicates: “They all thought it proper to attend upon the great Duke... and to acquaint him with the novelty of what had passed” (525). As is “proper,” the state sanctions private choice and family politics. Congreve uses chance to effect the “happy resolution” of a conflict, which proves to be an essentially state concern, in a gesture that exposes the inadequacies of aristocratic ideology which he critiques but also salvages from any serious threat. After all, miraculous resolutions are as ideologically effective as “real” ones.
NOTES


2. Salzman 337.


4. “The ‘personal merit’ of the protagonists in resisting aristocratic tyranny evaporates in this effulgence of ignorance, along with the illusion that there ever was a problem of status inconsistency for the constant lovers to overcome.” McKeon 265.

5. Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences, unidentified collective translation (1966; London: Routledge, 2000) Chapters 2 and 3. As Foucault argues, from the seventeenth century the constitution of signs was increasingly perceived as binary (in terms of the link between the significant and the signified), and to the question of how a sign is related to what it signifies the answer is sought in the analysis of representation during the Classical age (42-43).

6. William Congreve, “Incognita,” in An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Fiction, ed. Paul Salzman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), 481-82. All further references will be to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text. Incognita draws a distinction here between wit and “humour” or “constitution of the person.” In “On Humour in Comedy: A Letter to John Dennis” (in Sources of Dramatic Theory: Plato to Congreve, ed. Michael J. Sidnell, vol. 1 [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991]), Congreve defines humour as “from nature,” that “shows us as we are” because it “has relation to us, and to what proceeds from us.” He distinguishes it from “habit” (in the sense of dress but also of the peculiarities of behavior, manners and speech, common to most of people of the same country), which is “contracted by use or custom” (300-02). I suggest that the above distinction between humor and wit lies in Congreve’s homology between wit as a culturally acquired code and dress as “contracted by custom.” Both are cultural constructs and therefore equally unstable indications of “nature”. Novak points out that, in the novel, “wit itself is but another form of disguise, a mask” (336) but he omits Incognita’s lines on humor (336-37). In contrast with his comedies, Congreve does not problematize wit here. This partly pertains to the technical point that there are not many dialogues in his novel. Obviously the unity of action, characteristic of comedy, that he seeks to reproduce here as “an unity of contrivance” (“Preface to the Reader” 475) is not predicated on dialogue. See, for example, Corman, who remarks that the narrator of Incognita is far Wittier than any of the other characters’ (265).

7. For conjecturing in terms of probable signs, see Douglas Lane Patey, Probability and Literary Form: Philosphic Theory and Literary Practice in the Augustan Age (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984)
35-50. Foucault notes that from the seventeenth century onward the signs are perceived in terms of certainty and probability: “there can be no sign until there exists a known possibility of substitution between two known elements (59). Therefore the signifying function is constituted by knowledge and ceases to simply inhere in the very things that the signs indicate.

8. That, by being associated with romantic “transport,” the face of the beloved perpetuates illusion is also clear in Hippolito’s resolve not to reveal his true identity to Leonora once “she pulled off her mask and discover... the most angelic face he had ever beheld” (485).

9. Robert Markley, Two Edg’d Weapons: Style and Ideology in the Comedies of Etherege, Wycherley and Congreve (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), Chapter 6. As Markley argues, a play such as, for example, Love for Love harps on male fixations on female unknowability and on staple characterizations. However, here this mystification is intensely synecdochic and, as such, it acquires a fetishistic dimension. Women appear in token like Incognita’s white hand, that triggers Aurelian’s desire, or Leonora’s handkerchief placed on Hippolito’s helm, and as fragmented signs, like Incognita’s name on the torn piece of her letter. That the signature has been preserved as a pseudonym maintains female mystery, which is reinforced by female wearing of masks and veils.

10. “This opportunity of persuading man to disobedience, determined the matter in favour of Aurelian more than all his excellencies and qualifications, take him as Aurelian, or Hippolito, or both together” (500).

11. For the understanding of character on the basis of its signs as these are categorized according to general patterns, that is, decorums (i.e. age, sex, profession, rank etc.), see Patey 100-01.

12. The narrator’s comment on the two friends’ appearance, “different from other people and, indeed, differing from one another” (480), appears odd if not seen as ironically undercutting this very statement of difference.


15. “At the core of aristocratic ideology is the conviction that a stable social order is a dependable guide to the greater moral order, and in a patrilineal culture based upon degrees of status, social order is a function of genealogy. More succinctly, birth is a sign of worth”. (McKeon 214).


17. The narrator inscribes Hippolito’s “quality” and ancestry as the first mark of resemblance followed by “conformity of temper and equality in years” (476).

18. Foucault 51; for the faculty of discrimination, see 55-56.

19. Salzman 328. It is obvious that I disagree with Novak’s remark that “Incognita might just as well have taken place in London or Paris without the slightest change in the carefully plotted action” (341-42). In Restoration drama a stock Italy (or Spain) is used as the setting in a number of plays, and often serves asa means by which the dramatists reinforce their progressive critique of the rigorous patriarchal practices that these countries supposedly exemplify; in reality this critique is directed against their contemporary English reality.

20. The theme of forced marriage as a barbarous practice is at the core of Restoration comedy, especially in its early phase. So here Congreve treads on familiar grounds. Aurelian’s discourse of the right to self-determination in the face of paternal tyranny resonates in Valentine’s confrontation of his father in Love for Love (1695).


23. Barthes 94-95
24. Neither does the final restoration of Incognita’s name affect our retrospective perception of past events in the light of a new understanding. Congreve’s narrative is clearly not what Lennard J. Davis calls “teleogenic” in the sense that its closure affords a revision of past events from the viewpoint of subsequent ones. Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction (New York: Methuen, 1987) 208-13.

25. In “Naming and Entitlement in Wycherley, Etherege, and Dryden,” Comparative Drama 21 (1988): 259-89, Derek Hughes argues that Wycherley, Etherege, and Dryden no longer subscribe by the view that language is a register of moral order that expresses an analogy between individual and cosmos. I believe that this also applies to Congreve although, as Markley suggests, his comedies attempt the reconciliation of wit and morality in a way that preserves language as a register of the characters’ moral nature (195-250).

26. M. M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics”, in The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Texas UP, 1992) 95. In this essay, Bakhtin speaks of “adventure-time” in the Greek romances written between the second and sixth centuries A.D., which survives as late as Walter Scott. He argues that chance is the controlling element in the “time segments” that constitute this “adventure-time,” in the context of which the heroes act “as merely physical persons” since chance deprives them of initiative (91-95).

27. Bakhtin 100. Bakhtin argues that the interchangeability of time in the Greek romance signifies a temporal order in which historical time is erased (84-110).

**ABSTRACTS**

Le présent article étudie la propension à l’erreur qu’affichent les personnages de la longue nouvelle de William Congreve, Incognita (1692). Leur mauvaise perception des signes, qu’ils interprètent en termes de vraisemblance, amène les personnages de Congreve à suivre un chemin fait d’erreurs qui conduit à une crise. Cultivé dans le terrain de vraisemblance, le malentendu se développe surtout autour de ces signes qui relèvent de l’idéologie aristocratique. Alors que les pratiques traditionnelles de l’aristocratie sont présentées comme dépassées, voire obsolètes, Congreve les remet au goût du jour par le truchement du hasard qui “fait bien les choses”. Aussi privilégie-t-il les valeurs chevaleresques et fait l’apologie des intérêts patriarcaux. En effet, lorsque les véritables identités des héros sont rétablies, le hasard aura bien servi les exigences du rang social de chacun. Le conflit initial entre le libre choix d’un partenaire et l’intérêt patriarcal pour les aspects sociaux du mariage se voit totalement dépourvu de fondement à la fin de la nouvelle. Conserver son rang social est l’enjeu politique déterminant dans cette nouvelle où, en dépit des apparences, Congreve redore le blason de l’alliance aristocratique.

**AUTHORS**

**ASPASIA VELISSARIOU**

Dr Aspasia Velissariou is Associate Professor of English Literature, Faculty of English Studies, University of Athens, Greece. Her publications include articles on Samuel Beckett in the *Journal of...*